The relation of literature to history

Lewis Einstein

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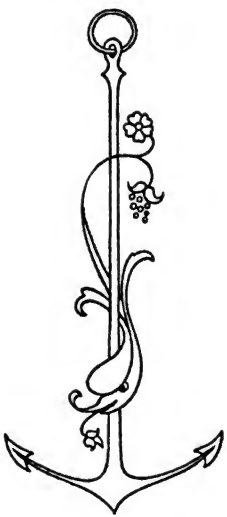
THE RELATION OF LITERATURE TO HISTORY

BY

LEWIS EINSTEIN



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SCIENCE, which struck the prevailing chord in the intellectual achievements of the nineteenth century, broke down by its victory many barriers which previously had impeded its march. Especially was this true in that great borderland between itself and the broader domains of art. All realms of thought and speculation lying between the two could not but feel the all-pervading influence of new habits of research and investigation. Most important of all, History swerved in its allegiance, and from having been an art, now enrolled itself under the banner of science. This was, in part, both a necessary and a healthy reaction against the fancifulness of previous historical interpretation. The lives of kings, the descriptions of courts, and the chronicles of wars, repeated by one writer after another, who accepted blindly what his predecessors had handed down to him, could scarcely reveal more than a shadow of the life experience of a nation. Perhaps, realizing this insufficiency, the historian of old endeavored by the perfection of literary art to atone for his other shortcomings. Fact was sacrificed to fancy, and

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style became the great goal of desire. But the scientific victory of the nineteenth century effected as great an upheaval in the world of thought as did the French Revolution in that of action. The search for truth became of paramount importance, to attain which all else was sacrificed, and the literary grace of ages swept ruthlessly to one side. History had to be written afresh from acts and charters, and thus a new historical school based and founded on the study of documentary evidence first saw the light.

It would be idle to regret what has been done, or to wish for a return to former conditions. That the good accomplished has far outweighed the evil none but the enemies of truth can deny. To-day, for the first time, history takes definite rank as a science. Yet it is not wholly without regret that one misses certain of the qualities of former historians. Literary grace has its charm, the lack of which is painfully evident in the too dreary pages of history written in our time. Many a writer, whose industry and perseverance would otherwise recommend him to fame, suffers from this want of style. Nor can it properly be said that the two qualities of matter and form, of substance and expression, are incompatible. Their union has disproved the contrary in some of the greatest writers of history. It is rather that the habit of literary style is no longer formed in the mind of modern historians who are barely conscious of what they lack. The problem is, therefore, how to bring history back to literature without forfeiting the advantages gained by a century of scientific research; to preserve the essential

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duality of its nature, and make of it at the same time an art and a science, a science in its substance, an art in its expression.

The reading of literature as a necessary preliminary to history would, perhaps, more than anything else, act as a remedy for existing conditions. But a difficulty will, perhaps, be urged in convincing the Teutonic school of historians and their American followers, of the necessity, let alone the desirability, of such study; so profoundly is even gold distrusted by those who seek only to mine the quartz without separating it from the precious metal.

Fortunately, in the study of literature a reward is ready after their own heart, a bait, which, perhaps, by its very extent, has passed almost unnoticed by those to whom it should properly make an appeal. Although the essential value of letters as a key to history lies in its representing the civilization of a period and giving expression to its aspirations and ideals, yet in voicing that civilization it offers material of great documentary value to the historian. Especially does this hold true, when considered from what might be called the Morellian point of view. The cardinal idea, herein, which in another field has revolutionized the study of art connoisseurship, is that the writer betrays himself far more in what he does unconsciously than in his conscious expression. In other words, where the Morellians in art endeavor to find the authorship of a picture in certain characteristics of feature or drapery peculiar to the painter's brush when off his guard, those anxious to apply a similar test to the literary document in its

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relation to history would seek it not so much in works written avowedly with a purpose as in writings where the political bias or intention of the author unconsciously betrays him. Corneille, in his dramas, gives full expression to the new spirit of the French monarchy, while from the *Canterbury Tales* the social structure of feudalism might be found anew; even in Shakespeare's plays the topical allusions have been passed over by all save Shakesperian scholars. When this is true of the greatest it is evident that minor men will suffer. It will happen in many instances that while certain writers are of such significance that they are universally known, others will pass unnoticed though of far greater importance to the historian, who has here relied too much on the judgment of the literary critic. An example of this is offered by Skelton the poet-laureate of Henry the Eighth. Although his dulness and lack of art have doomed him almost to oblivion, his works teem in contemporary allusions of the greatest interest. The corruption of the clergy, the rise of a middle class, the economic evils of the times, the feudal ideal clashing with the modern movement, all find expression in his uncouth verse, as also in the even rougher lines of his nameless imitators; yet neither Froude nor Green mentions him from this point of view, while even in Traill he is alluded to only as a poet. Skelton, however, offers only a single instance where a hundred might easily be found. A careful study of the literature of any age would thus cast fresh light on history, by illumining a new range of ideas. Yet, so far, only a beginning has been made

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in this field, which the Germans have called *Culturgeschichte*. Among its more distinguished representatives, Burckhardt, whose knowledge of Italy was unsurpassed, remained strangely unliterary in his treatment, while Boissier, who has interpreted Roman history by its literature, has been satisfied with fragmentary glimpses of his subject. The very few who have attempted such treatment, have, as a rule, been overwhelmed and dominated by the facts amassed.

To the historian of the future, dissatisfied with what has been done in the past, it will be left to interpret the mind of a nation and of an age, and, to arrive at this, he cannot remain content with externals. The vital importance of historical study lies in its lessons to humanity; all other benefits spring as corollaries from this. But to profit from such lessons the inner spirit of an age has to be reached and the individual studied in his civic and domestic relations and in such of his actions as are the expression of his ideals—as a citizen and as a father, in peace as in war. The growth and evolution of his ideals must thus be traced; his noblest aspirations and worst excesses must be weighed. Individually and collectively he must be studied, and then and then only will the historian's ideas be classified and his ripened judgment begin to form. The aids to such a study as this will be found scattered broadcast; not alone in the dusty pages of history, though the acts of convocations and the charters of cities will yield such material; not only in letters and memoirs will help be found, but the great body of literature will offer assistance. Nor will aid from such a source be a

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matter of individual appreciation. Unlike æsthetic judgment, its ideas depend not so much on opinion as they rest on fact. The reason that literature, therefore, has hitherto failed to undergo such an examination as this, is due to the overwhelming mass of new material which of late years has been brought into the study of history. Ranke pushed back the historical horizon by his use of documents. Since his day many other scholars have gone on with his task and material yearly sees the light which before lay mouldering in archives even when its existence was not unknown. His lesson, however, has in some measure been misapplied. His own desire having been to summon assistance from all sides by this new study of documents, his successors have only rarely crossed the threshold of political history with its immediate environment. The proportions of a further task may well prove formidable, the more so when a comparative treatment is attempted. Yet this last will be essential for the true historian. As Ranke himself was able to solve obscure questions in English history by his knowledge of contemporary events in other countries, so the scholar whose survey extends over comparative literature will find his range of vision greatly widened by the ability to appreciate spiritual motives dominant in other lands. The Tudor ideal of the State, with its conception, so novel in England, of a royal absolutism, no longer seems inexplicable, when a like movement can be traced, not only in the politics but in the literature, as well, of Europe in the Renaissance.

Comparative literature would thus throw light

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on the essentials of history by unfolding an element common to all countries in their pursuit in action of inner causes. It would tend, moreover, to present forcibly to the scholar that feeling of the essential brotherhood of nations which offered itself to the mind of mediæval man in the light of a Christian Republic. The historian would see that he described no longer isolated facts but parts of one great movement. Even as it is, the essential unity of human nature, despite of outward garb, is what constantly impresses the student of history. It cannot fail to do so even more when he reads its expression in letters as in action, and traces its course from one fountain head through many shifting channels. He then would realize how an organic unity common to the European world has shaped the destiny of nations, and how at great periods life and letters have been so intimately linked that for the student of the spirit they are inseparable.

The true nature and philosophy of history has so long baffled the scholar that, conscious of its difficulty, many of the greatest historians have searched for new criteria through which to pass their judgment. Thus it came about, with the final proof of evolution and the discovery of the laws of natural selection half a century ago, that kindred mechanical explanations were sought for to interpret history. Taine, Buckle, and our own Draper were among those who tried to explain historical action by geographical environment and found in nature the secret of civilized man. A second school of more recent growth has sought to find that secret in the

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operation of economic laws and a study of the routes of trade. Both tests have their value; neither nor both can be wholly sufficient, since each explains accidentals while failing to account for essentials. Physical laws will as little explain genius as economic laws will account for the sacrifice of patriotism. Far deeper spiritual motives must be sought for before success can be achieved.

It may seem a platitude to urge that in ideals lie the formative elements of civilization. Conceive, however, of any great period in the world's history —Periclean Athens, Augustan Rome, or Elizabethan England—as lacking in certain fundamental ideals, such as patriotism, justice, or humanity. True, these are by no means interchangeable, and their outward expression will vary from age to age and from country to country. Yet it is plainly impossible to represent any such period of civilization as lacking altogether in certain of the world's great virtues. It would seem therefore to be the first duty of the student of history to search out and weigh the ideals of any age; to test them with all the critical apparatus at his command and study them as forming part of the great mainsprings of action and conduct. Now there is a twofold expression of idealism—and here, no account will be taken of such evidences of national genius as music, architecture and great feats of engineering may afford; since however valuable in themselves they are rarely definite enough to permit of historical expression in other fields than their own. Far rather do ideals in action and in letters lie ready to be studied. The former have been

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treated by historians in all ages; the latter, with rare exception, have been the province of critics of literature alone.

The student of ideals in action will naturally find many counteracting elements in conflict with the pure expression of the ideal. Such limitations as are the result of chance and opportunity in conduct will tend obviously to interfere with preconceived design. It is for this reason that all general laws are so difficult of application and that great historical events of far-reaching importance have often rightly been ascribed to trifling causes. Yet though fulfilment became frequently a matter of chance, the purpose of action was often similar. Cæsar Borgia failed in his efforts to establish an Italian kingdom, while Ferdinand of Aragon succeeded in uniting Spain. The purpose of each was the same, the measure of their success was different. It may, perhaps, be asked of what use it is to trace the history of failures. Cannot the lost causes of mankind be ignored until its successes have better been understood? To do so, however, would be to overlook the true meaning of the human element in history—and when that is stripped the rest soon falls to the ground. The old Greek idea of tragedy, the action of man struggling against adverse fate, is as impressive in historical action as it is in drama. Napoleon is none the less striking a figure in the glow of Austerlitz because destined to end his life a prisoner on the barren rock of St. Helena. Others than John Brown have lain mouldering in their graves whose souls have marched onward to glory.

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To seek beneath the surface in order to find the influence of defeated or resisted action is, however, not always necessary. A medium, easier to read than the conduct of men, is at hand to express the potentialities of the ideal. It is in this that the study of letters enters to aid the historian's researches. To ideal literature it matters little that the outward embodiment of its ideal has been defeated or destroyed. The Frankish warrior Roland may well have died at Roncesvalles in a border fray against the Moor. The song of which he was the hero breathed the rising spirit of Christian chivalry and nascent patriotism more strongly than if success had greeted his arms and his life had been preserved to teach others by its example. The limitations of life itself, which constantly force themselves on the student of history, are thus minimized by their expression in ideal literature. True, but this is not history, it will be urged. Nor should it be claimed of literature, taken in this connection, that it is more than a most valuable adjunct to history, a pilot chart of each age and guide to the spirit of a nation as unaffected by counteracting elements. And the further fact that all limitations are not effaced in ideal literature is to the essential advantage of the historian, who is thus able to balance the characteristic qualities of each age against those which are universal.

Such a study of literature would go far towards solving the relation between ideals in action and in letters. That a definite relationship binds the two it is impossible to deny. No great era in the world's

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history has ever lacked expression in ideals. Often, indeed, its excellence in the arts has been the chief source of its greatness in history. The power of Athens, even in the Fifth Century, was as nothing compared to the might of a Gengis Khan, yet the one continues a living remembrance to influence civilized man through all time, while the other lingers only as a name. Conversely, it is true that an age without ideal expression can never be a great age. The dark centuries after the fall of Rome are as blanks to our memory. The real test of greatness in a nation, as on a minor scale in an individual, is what each has done that entitles it to live. To what degree has it understood, at any period, the true purpose of its existence, and piercing through the surface of things has linked its temporal nature with the eternal. Some ideal expression of what it has accomplished will always be found. When this ideal has been expressed in action, when by true sacrifice and devotion the foundations of a nation's welfare have been laid, little will it matter in after years if royal dynasties be overthrown, if battles be lost or capitals invaded. So long as the national spirit is unsubdued, so long as the national *ethos* remains preserved, lasting evil cannot befall it. France, with the enemy on its soil, has time and again reasserted its own, while India has fallen prey to every invader.

The literary expression of ideals partakes of greatness through reflecting the Universal. And because its source of inspiration is in life itself, it has been great only when life was great. By this is

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meant, not necessarily the life of its immediate surroundings, but that life from which it has drawn the sources of its inspiration. This will explain the seeming paradox in Germany, of literary ideals preceding those of action. Goethe and Lessing, Herder and Schiller awakened a new national feeling through the appreciation of ancient ideals. The heroism of Greece, rising to throw back the Persian invader, was far more living to their genius than the sentimental trifling of eighteenth century Germany. What they did, however, could have happened only in a critical age of the world's activity. Most periods offer, therefore, a more direct relation between ideals in action and in letters. So, too, the want of true ideals is reflected at once in the literature of an age. In England of the early sixteenth century, the rapacity of Henry the Eighth, and the sordid material greed of all classes could with difficulty find ideal expression in letters. Solitary writers like More and Surrey, almost alone in that wilderness, voice a nobler feeling. It required the new spirit infused into the nation with the advent of Elizabeth, and the speedy need for united action against the Spaniard, to bring it to a sense of its own. The national spirit, brought face to face with danger, rose then with sudden bounds which carried it to impetuous expression in life and in letters. The splendid daring of English seamen was voiced by English poets. Ideals of action and of letters went almost hand in hand, though action led and literature followed in her wake. The great deeds of the reign of Elizabeth were well nigh over when

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Spenser and Shakespeare wrote ; but their splendid courtesy might never have been voiced without the noble pattern which lives like Sidney's offered.

The twofold expression of ideals, in life as in letters, tends to establish by its relationship a ratio which may serve as an index of civilization. For if civilization is aught more than material progress, if economic conditions are not its reason, but its foundation, then surely must its key be searched for in ideals in which the living spirit of a nation is preserved. The perpetuation of the race is only the condition of a country's existence, not the source of its greatness. That source lies far deeper, dependent not so much on the state of the body, as on the resolute virtues of the mind. The Greeks, with appreciation far truer than our own of the laws which govern civilization, viewed Babylon with contempt as an agglomeration of mankind, whose inhabitants herded together solely for gain.

In ideals lies therefore the truest expression of civilization, the living symbol of its existence. And when ideals of action and of letters approach each other, when they represent not isolated examples of the devotion of noble minds, but the exaltation which at times uplifts even the meanest with a desire to contribute to their nation's glory, then does that age breathe the spirit of civilization. But in so far as they diverge, in so far as literature reflects no longer the ideals of life, nor life looks to letters for the mirror of its virtue, has there been a decay. History will only confirm this. The age of Pericles offered the perfect flower in Athens of the civiliza-

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tion of what was, judged even by the standards of antiquity, a small nation. In so narrow a medium, amid a race richly dowered with the genius of art, the relation between letters and life was not difficult to establish, and living ideals soon found adequate expression in literature. Yet the very perfection of Grecian greatness was almost the cause of its dissipation. Broadcast, it spread Hellenic civilization, till its vital strength sapped by this task could no more be voiced in literary ideals, which with the decay of Greece departed more and more from life. In the next great era, the ever widening circle of civilization, following the golden age of Rome, was likewise to weaken the force of former ideals, whose guardians sacrificed their treasure before the glitter of new temptations.

Last of all, in the modern world, among the nations called civilized, who in their culture at least are the children of Rome, each one has enjoyed some brief period when perfection was nearly reached and the ideals of letters were those of life. But when that movement was over, often before the perfect union could be fully consummated, there came a new period of preparation in which the bond between life and letters slackened once more. The widening circle of civilization left little time for contemplation or for that repose which is bred by disregard of others. New religious ideals have, indeed, accustomed it to sacrifice in hearkening to the cry from below. And in so doing it has differed from the culture of the ancient world, which, despite its beauty, was blighted in the root. Such as it was it

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could advance no further; even in Athens it was a civilization in which woman was the inferior and the best citizen a slave-holder. Our own civilization, if less perfect, is yet nobler in its aspirations. Democracy has become our goal, though not our fulfilment. Only dimly from afar we have realized its beauty. Having forsaken one haven, the heights of the other are barely in sight, while on all sides runs the stormy sea. Small wonder that some are feeble-hearted and fain to return! We have, indeed, erected an ideal, but we have not made ourselves worthy of it. Even in our midst there is dissension. How then can we expect the fruit of perfect union before it has ripened? But the promise of the golden future lies before us. It is for us to prove if the guerdon shall be ours.

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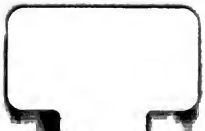

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